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SAINT MARIE OF THE INCARNATION

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SAINT MARIE OF THE INCARNATION

THE STORY OF THE
FIRST MISSIONARY SISTERS IN CANADA

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For
Reverend Paschal Boland, O.S.B.,
Monk of Saint Meinrad Archabbey,
Saint Meinrad, Indiana,
in appreciation of much kindness.

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SAINT MARIE
OF THE INCARNATION



CHAPTER 1

THE MOTHER

YOUNG PIERRE DUPLETTE laid three fresh logs atop the small fire on his master's hearth, then glanced hopefully at the white-haired figure bent over a desk in the far corner of the room. Bertrand d'Eschaux, the Archbishop of Tours, was not a man to demand bodily comforts for himself, even on a cold January morning like this one of the year 1631. There was good reason to believe that a special visitor was about to arrive, and a special visitor generally meant not only a bit of decent warmth in the Archbishop's drab study, but wine and cakes as well.

"Monseigneur, is there anything else you'd like?" asked the boy respectfully.

Slowly the old Archbishop rose to his feet and approached the crackling fire. "No, Pierre—unless it is the answers to a few questions."

"And what would they be, Monseigneur?"

"First, do you know anything of Madame Marie Martin?"

"The daughter of Florent Guyart, the baker? The

poor woman who lost her husband eleven years ago?"

The same."

Pierre nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes, Monseigneur! A very holy soul. Whenever I see her praying in church, I always feel as though I'm watching a saint. She's wonderfully kind to the poor, too. And of course a fine mother to her boy."

"Ah, young Claude. By the way, how old is the lad now?"

"Not quite twelve, Monseigneur. And a strange little character, if I may say so."

"Strange?"

"Well, perhaps that's not the word. But everyone knows he ran away to Paris last week because he said he wasn't loved at home. Three days he was gone, too, which almost broke his mother's heart. Can you imagine a normal child doing such a thing?"

The Archbishop smiled. Young Pierre Duplette—serious, hard-working and trustworthy—had been all but a son to him since that fateful day, eighteen years before, when the plague had carried off both the boy's parents.

"Now, Pierre, don't forget it takes all kinds of folk to make a world," he observed mildly. "Claude Martin will find his place someday." Then, suddenly, cocking his ear, he said, "But isn't that the doorbell? Run and answer it like a good soul. I'm expecting a visitor."

Pierre's eyes shone. So, he'd been right after all! "Of course, Monseigneur. I'll go at once. And

perhaps you'll be wanting wine and cakes in a little while?"

The Archbishop nodded. "Yes, Pierre. The best wine and cakes in the house."

Alone for a moment, Bertrand d'Eschaux turned from the fire and crossed the room to stand by the window overlooking a rustic shrine to Our Lady in the garden outside. It was a desolate place now, the little shrine, with only a few barren trees and vines for a background. Yet the face of the Virgin's statue was as gracious as in the time of blossoms. Indeed, the outstretched hands suddenly seemed to come alive in the pale January sunlight as though they would bestow upon the Archbishop all manner of priceless treasures.

"Not so much for myself as for another, Holy Virgin," he pleaded silently.

Even as the Archbishop prayed, there came a soft rap at the door. Turning, he saw an attractive woman in her early thirties being ushered into the room by a somewhat bewildered Pierre. So there was a reason behind all those questions, the boy's look plainly said.

Although the newcomer was very simply attired—a black hooded cloak covering a dress of common gray homespun—her smile was as radiant as that of a young girl, and the dark eyes that lifted to his own as she came forward to kiss his ring were extraordinarily beautiful.

"Bonjour, Madame Martin! How good to see you!"

"Bonjour, Monseigneur! How good of you to want to see me!"

When Pierre had left the room, the Archbishop

motioned his guest to a chair beside his own close to the fire. "I sent word for you to come, Madame, after hearing what the Prioress of the Ursulines had to tell me yesterday. That was surely good news!"

Madame Martin's slim fingers toyed with the rough folds of her cloak. "Mère Françoise de Saint Bernard, she . . . she told you everything, Monseigneur?"

"She told me that you plan to enter the convent very soon; that your sister and her husband have promised to look after your little boy until he comes of age; and that everything is going to work out well."

In spite of her brave efforts to control them, sudden tears glistened in Madame Martin's dark eyes. "It . . . it's like my beautiful childhood dream come true," she whispered. "And yet at times I'm so frightened, Monseigneur—almost as though the dream were coming true too late. . . ."

The Archbishop leaned forward earnestly. "If anything's troubling you, Madame, why not begin at the beginning and tell me all about it? Maybe I can help you."

"But it would take so long—"

"Nonsense! Today my time is all yours. Come, let's start at the beginning. What's this about a childhood dream coming true?"

So, haltingly at first, then with renewed courage, Madame Martin began to relate her story.

"I was a little girl of seven, Monseigneur, when I dreamed that Our Lord came down through the sky to the schoolyard where I was playing and asked

me if I'd be His special friend. So great was the love that came into my heart that right away in my dream I said I would."

"And then?"

"I was so happy afterward that I told everyone of what had happened. No one paid much attention, of course, for it was only a dream, but I didn't mind. It was enough to know that Jesus loved me, and that I loved Him more than anyone or anything in the world."

"So?"

"By the time I was fourteen, I felt that I was called to be a nun. I told this to my mother, who was most kind, but she said I was still very young and that I must think and pray a great deal before making any decision. She was so serious, Monseigneur, that somehow I was led to believe that convent life was not for me. Then, when I was seventeen—"

"Yes?"

"My father decided I ought to marry a silk merchant—Claude Martin. He was so set on the idea, and Claude was such a good young man, that I never dreamed of questioning anything. We were married in just a few weeks. Two years later, when I was nineteen, our little boy Claude was born."

The Archbishop nodded approvingly. It had been a good idea to have Madame Martin tell her story. The tears were gone from her eyes now, and she seemed to be far more at ease.

"And then what happened, my child?"

"Presently our silk business began to fail. This

worried my husband so much that soon he became quite ill. I nursed him as well as I could, but he only grew worse. Within six months he was dead, Monseigneur, leaving me penniless, and with a little baby to care for.”

“And you’re just twenty years old? Poor child! What did you do then?”

“For almost two years I lived at home and helped my father with his bakery business. After that I went to live with my older sister Claude and her husband Paul.”

“Ah, Madame and Monsieur Buisson?”

“Yes. And how good they’ve been to my boy and me during the past nine years! We’ve never wanted for anything.”

For a moment the Archbishop was silent, busying himself with adding a fresh log to the fire. But when he turned to Madame Martin, an odd smile was playing about his lips. “Probably you’ve earned that blessing,” he observed dryly. “Doesn’t Monsieur Buisson own a thriving transportation business? And don’t you practically run it for him?”

“Well—”

“Dozens of vans, carts, horses, drivers, shipments to and from all parts of France—”

“I’m used to the work, Monseigneur”

“Payrolls to meet, bills to be paid, books to be balanced, warehouses to manage—”

“Please, Monseigneur—”

“Merchandise to be accounted for, disputes to be settled—ah, Madame, I’ve often heard it said that you’re down at the river docks until well after mid-

night whenever a boat comes in."

Madame Martin smiled faintly. "You're making me seem like a martyr," she protested, "when all this work is nothing more than God's will for me. Yet right along I've felt that someday He'd call me to other work. Once my boy was old enough to do without a mother's care, He'd want me to go to some convent to give myself to His service."

"And now you think the time has come?"

"I know it has, Monseigneur. Claude will be twelve in April. And the Ursulines have just agreed to let me try their way of life."

For a moment the Archbishop was thoughtful. What was it Madame Martin had said earlier? *"It's like my beautiful childhood dream come true . . . and yet at times I'm so frightened . . . almost as though the dream were coming true too late. . . ."*

"My child," he said finally, "you've scarcely mentioned young Claude's part in all this. That, I'm sure, is what is troubling you. Does the lad know that you plan to leave him for the convent?"

"Not yet, Monseigneur. I haven't had the courage to tell him. But he may suspect some kind of change, for of late the house has been a strange and miserable place. My sister and brother-in-law are so upset about my plans that sometimes they scarcely speak to or look at either of us."

"They don't approve of your being a nun?"

"Oh, no! They say the religious life is for young girls with no responsibilities, not a thirty-one-year-old widow with a fatherless boy to support. Besides, their business is growing very rapidly, and they say I

owe it to them to stay on and help.”

“Yet yesterday Mère Françoise* told me that the Buissons have agreed to care for Claude!”

“Ah, but only grudgingly. And whenever I think of the poor child’s growing up without either of his real parents with him, my heart almost breaks. God is calling me to His service, Monseigneur, and I long to answer the summons. But where am I to find the courage to leave my boy? Where? And when?”

Slowly the old Archbishop rose to his feet and led Madame Martin to the window overlooking the garden. “There,” he said gently, pointing to the Virgin’s little shrine, “there is a woman who knew how to lose her Son, my child. Ask her for help.”

But—

“It’s hard, of course. Very hard. But when you leave here, you must go at once to Claude and tell him everything. Our Lady will help the little fellow to understand far better than you think.”

Upon her return to the Buisson house, Madame Martin went immediately in search of Claude. She found him in his room, pale-faced and woebegone, idly leafing through an old textbook. Removing her cloak, she sat down beside him.

“Darling, what’s the trouble?” she asked anxiously. “Don’t you feel well?”

The boy’s thin mouth tightened. “I . . . I’m all right, Maman.”**

“But you look so unhappy! Wouldn’t you like to go outside and play with your little cousin Marie?”

* “Mère”= French for “Mother.” (“Mère” rhymes with “fair”)

** “Maman”= “Mama.”

"There's no fun in playing with a four-year-old girl."

"Well, what would you like to do then?"

"Nothing."

"But, Claude—"

Suddenly the boy threw down his book and burst into tears. "Maman, why is everything so different these days?" he sobbed. "Why do people stop talking as soon as they see me, then shake their heads and turn away as though something dreadful were going to happen? There's . . . there's some kind of terrible secret. . . ."

"Now, son—"

"I can't stand it, Maman! I just can't! And while you were gone this morning, I heard Uncle Paul tell Aunt Claude that you've never really loved me!"

A pang shot through the mother's heart as she forced herself to remain calm. What a terrible mistake not to have taken this child into her confidence long ago! No wonder he had run off to Paris last week, bewildered and hurt by all the idle gossip in the Buisson house.

"Darling, listen to me," she said comfortingly "I love you more than anyone or anything in the world. Can't you believe that?"

"But—"

"And because I love you so much, I'm going to ask you to help me do something very important. No one but you can have a part in this, Claude—not even the wisest or the richest or the greatest person on earth."

Slowly the boy's sobs lessened. "W-what is it?" he choked. "W-what do you mean, Maman?"

"I want you to help me save souls, son—through

sacrifice.”

“But I don’t understand—”

“Listen, dear. Ever since you were a little baby, and even long before that, I’ve wanted to be a nun. Now, do you think you could let me go away to be an Ursuline? Could you give me permission for that?”

For a long moment Claude stared at his mother, his eyes perplexed and fearful. “Is . . . is that the secret everyone’s been trying to keep from me?”

“That’s it.”

“You mean you want to go away from here and never see me again?”

“Of course not, darling! The Ursuline convent is only a few blocks away. You may come for visits as often as you wish.”

“But, Maman—”

“Think, son, what it means when people enter the religious life! In due course all the prayers they offer, all the duties they perform, are given a wonderful new power to save the poor sinners of the world. Wouldn’t you be glad for me to have a blessing like that?”

Claude looked uncertainly at the floor. In all his eleven years he had never known such a situation as this. Maman, from whom he had so often asked one permission or another, was now asking a permission from him! And not only was she waiting for his decision, millions of others must be waiting for it, too, in that mysterious world of sinners with which Maman seemed to be so concerned . . .

Slowly the boy raised his eyes. “I . . . I guess it’ll

be all right for you to go to the convent," he said finally, and his voice was very small and low. "I guess you'll do a lot of good there, Maman."

Madame Martin's heart all but broke. How she longed to press this solemn-faced youngster to her breast, to pour out her love for him in tender words and caresses. But since that might lead to tears, she contented herself with tracing the Sign of the Cross upon Claude's forehead as he knelt at her feet.

"Son, you've made me very proud and happy," she whispered. "Now, shall we go and find Uncle Paul and Aunt Claude and tell them what you've just told me? They'll be so relieved to hear how brave you've been!"

However, the Buissons were disappointed at Claude's reaction to his mother's plans. The loss of a worker who had been so useful to them during the past nine years was hard to bear, and they made no effort to hide their feelings.

"Marie, how can you hope to be an Ursuline at your age?" demanded Paul Buisson impatiently. "For one thing, your health won't stand the strain. For another, it's foolish for an experienced businesswoman to shut herself away in a convent. Why, just think of all the good you could do if you stay in the world!"

Madame Buisson nodded tearfully. "That's right, Marie. Think of the dozens of our own workmen you've helped to return to the Sacraments."

"But once you're gone, who's to see that they don't slip back again into their old ways?"

"And their wives and families with them?"

Madame Martin smiled. "You two have forgotten one important thing," she said thoughtfully, "God's will. To the best of my knowledge, He wants me to join the Ursulines. Therefore, nothing else matters."

Marie Martin's father, old Florent Guyart, objected to his daughter's religious vocation as vigorously as did her sister and brother-in-law. But in spite of all family arguments, a strange little procession set out through the streets of Tours for the Ursuline convent on the morning of January 25, 1631, the feast of the conversion of Saint Paul. First came little Marie Buisson, bearing her aunt's large crucifix. Next came the Buissons, then Florent Guyart, Marie Martin herself, Dom Raymond (the priest who had long been her confessor), Claude and several friends and neighbors. Nearly everyone was weeping save Madame Martin. Her heart was heavy, of course, at the impending separation from her son, but she forced herself to appear in good spirits and to walk briskly.

"Dear Lord, don't let me weaken!" she murmured. "Don't let me see those tears in Claude's eyes."

A moment later, as the group reached the convent and the heavy wooden doors swung wide, the struggle was over. Not trusting herself to say good-by, Madame Martin merely smiled at her dear ones, knelt for Dom Raymond's blessing, then resolutely crossed the threshold into the cloister. There the Prioress and her community were awaiting her with open arms.

As she looked at all the eager faces about her, suddenly it seemed to Marie Martin that she had



A STRANGE LITTLE PROCESSION SET OUT
FOR THE URSULINE CONVENT.

known this new family all her life. Of course the Prioress, Mère Françoise de Saint Bernard, had been her dear friend for some time, but now the others—the bright-eyed little novices, the Sisters who worked in the kitchen, garden and laundry, the infirm and aged ones whom one of these days God would reward with eternal joy—all were at once immeasurably dear to her.

“Dear Lord, how can I thank You?” she prayed silently. “At last I’ve come home!”

The next morning Soeur Marie* (for thus she would be known until she received the habit) was even happier. What peace and joy within these convent walls where everyone was dedicated to God’s service! Of course it was a pity that her twenty-eight companions in the novitiate—the oldest was only sixteen—had somehow decided that she had been a very important person in the world and so must now be treated with unusual consideration. For instance, a moment ago—

“I’ll wash that window, Soeur Marie,” one little novice had insisted. “That kind of work is too hard for you.”

“And I’ll mop the floor,” another had put in cheerfully. “After all, you shouldn’t undertake too much in your first few days here.”

“Oh, no, Sister! Especially not at your age.”

As she set herself to the one task which had been allowed her—the dusting of a few chairs—Soeur Marie could scarcely keep from laughing. If only

* “Soeur” = French for “Sister”

these little Sisters could know the amount of work which she had handled for her brother-in-law, even to the unharnessing, feeding and bedding down of some fifty truck holies at night! But of course these little novices meant well, and it would never do to hurt their feelings. A few words to the Novice Mistress, and the problem would surely be solved.

Even as she was reflecting upon all this, a bell sounded in the corridor. At once pails were carried off to be emptied, mops and dusters put away, aprons doffed, veils and habits straightened.

"Soeur Marie, we have special prayers in the chapel now," whispered the senior novice. "Please come and take your place in line."

As she started from the room with the others, Soeur Marie's eyes sparkled with joy. It was so good to be here, to know that she had given herself to God as best she could, and that now all that mattered was to obey the holy Rule in all things!

But a moment later, as she took her place in the chapel, she suddenly felt her blood run cold. Far away in the distance was the heart-rending wail of a familiar little voice:

"Maman, Maman, where are you?"

Soeur Marie turned pale. Surely that couldn't be Claude! Yet the brief stir among the young nuns kneeling beside her, the swift glances of sympathy, were proof enough.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee," intoned the Novice Mistress calmly.

"Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus," responded the novices.

“Incline unto my aid, O God.”

“O Lord, make haste to help me.”

“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.”

“As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. . . .”

Soeur Marie’s head drooped. Even above this earnest chorus of prayer she could still hear her child’s frantic crying—nearer now, and more intense:

“Maman, Maman, where are you? I want you back!”